

Contradictions

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**THE
MINSTREL**

REDEEMER UNIVERSITY COLLEGE'S MAGAZINE OF CREATIVITY



ROX4A59
by Jordan Powell

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Brick
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this gift of rain

by Emily Germain

The rain falls heavy today. It marches in the streets, assailing the windshields of passing cars. It rushes in a body toward the drain in the street. It drips from the roof of the building above her and falls nine stories to the street below.

She sits on the fire escape, wrapped in a sea-green sweater. Her legs dangle over the street, rain falls from her shoes. She holds a damp sheet of cardboard over her head, and her eyes shine from beneath it like wet glass. Her hands are clammy cold.

November in this city.

This girl.

The rain falls heavy and she thinks of falling, diving, meeting the river in the street with a hollow splash. The water would flow red. And she would mingle with it, her life and its life together, elemental.

She leans forward, looks down, watching the rain fall. Would it be enough?

She leans back again, pain pummelling the inside of her ribs, like a small, insistent fist. He is a mind-reader, this child. Hunger, next to him, scratches the inside of her stomach.

Inside the building, she knows that her apartment is completely still. Her sisters are quiet in the bedroom. Red curtains are drawn against the window, against the soft grey light of the rain. One sister lies on her stomach across her quilt, reading a magazine by the pink light of her bedside lamp. The other, one leg

draped over the metal rail of her top bunk, paints her fingernails green, blue, purple, by turn. The African violet is dying on the dresser in its chipped clay pot, its dead leaves moist and rotting into the soil.

She's afraid to go inside. The man in the elevator has taken to the stairwells in the building, to opening doors before her and closing them firmly again once she's passed through. The halls whisper of him; she can hear his footsteps everywhere. The vinyl railings are slick with his fingerprints. Even in her own apartment, she expects to look up and see him standing in the doorway to her room.

She's afraid that she'll never get out.

He has no face, the man in the elevator. The skin is pulled tight over his bones, leaving depressions for his eye sockets, a shallow valley for his mouth. But all is smooth. No way in. No way out.

His hands seem strange to have rounded, pink fingernails, rings even, for decoration. His fingers are long and delicately boned, like teaspoons. He has no hair, but wears a fedora pulled low over his forehead. He also wears a plaid blazer. And a burgundy tie. A pair of black, shiny shoes with no laces and turned-up toes.

He waits in the elevator, lurks in the stairwells. When the elevator doors slide open, he stands just on the other side.

He never speaks, never makes a sound. How could he, with his seamless mask of flesh? His hands are expressive, working with buttons and zippers. His fingers amphibious, his skin beneath the shirt faintly wet, reminiscent of pond creatures and algae. Slightly cold, but not unpleasant to the touch. His scent is like dead leaves, soaking their life blood into the muddy ground of autumn.

The elevator suspends in time between the ninth floor and the ground floor. She knows nothing but his fingers, the verity of his existence, the slight squeak of his shoes as he shifts his weight toward her. Light, dark, colour, sound, sight – all blend into a single stream of sensation, flowing over her like a sentient waterfall.

In time, she reaches up and feels her own face, feels that it is like his. No eyes, no mouth or nose. Only smooth skin, only sensations skimming that skin, only desire seizing the root of her spine, like a hand clutching open and closed. Panic flutters in her chest, but she forces it down, forces it to meld with her desire until her urgency mounts into a single, voiceless cry.

The elevator jolts onto the ground floor, and a sharp sound, like an abbreviated doorbell, cuts into her consciousness. Hastily reordering her clothing, she leaves the elevator without turning back.

She enters the lobby blinking, unsure of whether to dance or cry. The grey light of the rain, through the heavy glass doors,

strikes her eyes as though she's been in the dark for hours. The insistent hum of city traffic beyond the doors is too near, too loud.

She lifts a hand to feel her face. Eyelashes brush her fingers, and she feels the flesh of her nose and mouth. She licks her thumb, to make sure, to feel the wetness.

Outside, she feels the rain run down her neck and inside her sweater. She's going to the farmers' market to buy lettuce and potatoes. Cold water soaks through the thin soles of her shoes. With all the water running down her face, most people can't see her tears.

And now, the child.

She's afraid to see the doctor, afraid to see an ultrasound of the baby, afraid to acknowledge his reality. She wants to get rid of him, to purge her body of his habitation. She sometimes feels him now, punching tiny fists and feet against the walls of his prison. A child with no face can still feed from an umbilical cord. Maybe, if she stops eating, the child will starve.

She's going to the farmers' market to buy lettuce and potatoes. Not for herself, for her sisters. She pulls her sweater around herself, walks through puddles, pushes between people in the crowd on the sidewalk, never making eye contact. Umbrellas sway and drip around her. Her hair is sodden now, like the weeds fringing a pond.

She walks next to the buildings, trying to keep away from the crowd.

Stop!

She glances around, still walking. Behind her now, crouching in a doorway, is an old, old woman. She wears a stained red jacket, and a colourful handkerchief bound in knots around her head. She grins widely – three teeth still cling to her gums. Her fingers, like a mess of twigs, tangle in her lap. She lifts them and beckons eagerly.

Come back, Mama!

Her voice carries over the buzz of the city. The girl pauses, slowly walks back to stand in front of the old woman.

Good, Mama! Here, here is gift for you.

Next to her, on the doorstep, is a little, white pair of baby shoes. The girl feels small hands twisting her heart. She backs away, remembering the damp smoothness of his skin.

No, Mama. Here, here is for you.

The old woman stands and cradles the shoes between her bent fingers. She reaches them out to the girl.

Here is for you.

She takes them. She puts them inside her sweater to keep them dry. The old woman's grin spreads wider.

Happy Mama, she says. Gift will make baby happy, too.

The girl stumbles away without saying anything. She

doesn't go to the farmers' market. She goes to walk next to the river.

The old woman sits in the doorway and smiles.

The rain falls heavy. It washes the cars in the street below; it bathes the city buildings. She sits on the fire escape. Her head is uncovered, her body immersed in the falling water. Her white T-shirt clings to her flesh. The wind is cold, but she hardly shivers at all.

November in this city.

Anna-Maria.

She looks up to the grey basin of the sky and thinks of whirling, falling snowflakes flying like white birds above the street. She thinks of Christmas with her sisters, of lighting the tree, covered in tinsel like a stream of shimmering water. She thinks of drinking hot tea and eating cookies tasting of ginger. She thinks of locking the apartment door on the man in the elevator. She dreams of her child.

Anna-Maria goes inside, shaking water from her hair. She pulls off her T-shirt and wrings it out into the kitchen sink. She wraps herself in a blanket and soaks a teabag in a mug of hot water. Teresa and Ruby are doing their homework at the kitchen table, sharing a calculator and giggling together. Outside, the man in the elevator waits and decays, but Anna-Maria knows that she will never even look at him again.

Let his fingers and other appendages rot into each other, until he is nothing more than a solid lump of hungry flesh, smelling of pond water and dead leaves. Let him wait and never see the sun.

The rain falls heavy.

Life is new.

When the baby is born in early March, it's a girl, and she is named Shiloh. She has wide blue eyes, a small, wet mouth and a tiny mound of a nose. She lies in a puddle of sunshine on Teresa's quilt and waves her fists through the air above her. She listens for hours while Anna-Maria talks with her sisters.

She wears little white shoes. She fills her diapers. And she smiles.

conversations with a forest

by Jonathan VanderPloeg

I walked into the forest
One day for a walk
to be among the fir trees
and see if they would talk

I walked along for hours
not hearing any peep
until I came across
a rushing bubbling creek

This is my chance, I thought
to have a conversation
that's better than a monologue
and longer in duration

I chatted up and down the creek
I had much to say
and after I had my reply
I soon was on my way

Brisking upon the forest floor
I munched and crunched along
until I came across a lake
and it had for me a song

Never did the lake-mouth sing
such a haunting tune
tender soft and moving
just enough to touch the moon

in my heart I'll treasure always
the meaning of that song
the last time I have heard it
has been all far too long

On my way I went again
in search of what I seek
it wasn't in the water
that I'd find the one to meet

I came into a clearing
with only one to see
a weeping willow standing
and waiting there for me

I crept up to it trembling
and told it my first name
it said to me "Be silent,
for that is why you came."

"Past the waters and the trees
you have blindly come.
You have the audacity
to ask a single question."

Gulped I did at that last phrase
and summoned up my pluck
'Did God make me,' I asked
'or was it just dumb luck?'

Then the willow began to weep
and so concludes my quest
it bent it's head down to mine
and granted my request

i guess i'm fine with walking

by Laura Spoelstra

I remember when I was young I never
had one of them fancy bikes like kids
got now, with the tassels on the handle-
bars and all them flashy colours and that
alligator bell. I only ever had my dad's
old hockey card collection which I taped
to my spokes real good (with green duct
tape) so I could ride down the street roar-
ing like motorcycles.

I never did live in one of them big houses
in the city with the stone lions out front
and a TV bigger than me when I'm standing.
My house was a dirty place that was
small and old and shared with mice. It
smelled like an attic in the winter and
warm tar when it was hot and sunny.
Sometimes the mice would eat round the
windows and we'd keep stuffing towels
in to keep the inside in and the outside
out.
I knew some kids back then who had
nice suits and skirts and dressed real im-
pressive with ties and makeup and shiny
shoes. I never did care about the way my
shoes looked. I was busy enough climbing
trees and eating whole apples to worry
about something as silly as that.

Some people's parents took them on real
expensive vacations with yachts and
things like meeting celebrities in restaurants.
I never have been on a yacht, but
I've been jumping in puddles in the rain
and I guess that's probably pretty close.
A friend of mine bought a car that smells
like factories and has a cup holder arm-
rest. He keeps trying to drive me to work
every morning, but I'd rather walk. May-
be he knows something about the world
that I don't, but I guess I'm fine with not
knowing.
I guess I'm fine with walking.

the red pepper garden

by Janelle DeBoer

The glass of the window of the century old home fogged by the even breathing of the old man. In a soft motion, he reached up with a shaky hand and wiped the glass clean, and peered out into the morning. The sky was a soft pink at this hour, but not as pink as yesterday. Today there were some purples and yellows and oranges twirling in and around sky's soft masterpiece. The old man didn't pay attention to those colours though, because they didn't matter. They would always be there. The sky was only painted with pink on these mornings.

Across the yard he could see two ducks grazing over the waters of the little pond. He remembered the first time he swam in those waters. The sleek chill of the soft water the moment he splashed in, the tickle of the reeds against his toes as he sank to the bottom. He shivered with the memory. He did not envy the ducks, he knew how cold the water must be, how he had shivered as he raced back to the warmth of the house that night so many years ago. Did they feel the cold the way he had? He had not gone over to the pond in some years now. It was not far, but his legs refused to take him there.

He looked out into the garden. His garden. So much time over so many years had been spent in that garden, working the soil until it was soft, until you could reach down and pick up a handful and let it sprinkle to the ground, let it dance with your fingers, and watch it twist through the air until each speck landed with out a sound. The memory made him shiver. Such pride in something so simple. He had planted every kind of vegetable he could name.

A row of radish, a row of rhubarb, and every year, three rows of red peppers. He chuckled softly to himself and shook his head. He could not stand the sight of them. All those years of endless peppers, all the waste when the frost came unexpectedly and devoured them of life and colour. He hated them. Why would anyone want three rows of red peppers in their garden?

The old man startled at the sound of the grandfather clock from the next room. He counted the deep sounds, one... two... three... the room was silent after seven chimes. Silence. He wiped the fog from the window again and sighed softly, sadly. Slowly his feet moved him to the door, outside. The porch steps were creaky, unstable. He needed his hand on the railing to guide him. With little thought, the old man shuffled all the way across his yard to the front of his old home, his feet followed the familiar path. His hands clasped together and he offered them his pockets against the morning chill. He shivered. Rounding the corner to the front of his home, he stopped at the flower bed, bent slightly, and picked a fresh pink rose. The surrounding stems were browning with evidence of past picks; from the rose he picked yesterday, the day before...a week past. The old man held the soft pink rose in his right hand, and used his left hand to guide him on the railing as he made his way back up the creaky steps into his house, back to the window.

The vase on the windowsill still held the rose he had picked yesterday. It had started to droop a little, and a few petals lay scattered across the floor. The colour had faded. The little old man threw out the old rose, added fresh water to the vase, and placed the newly picked flower in the vase on the windowsill, next to the dust covered picture frame. It was the same thing everyday. Always a new rose, always next to her picture.

She has been almost seven years old when that picture had been taken, it had been a week before her birthday. She was in the garden, a pepper in her right hand., and a pepper in her left hand. Pepper juice all over her pink swim suit. He would never understand what it was about those peppers that she loved so much, but it was the same thing everyday; a swim in the pond, and a red pepper snack.

As he did every morning, the old man shivered and tried to force away those sudden cold, murky memories, but they wouldn't leave. In a violent flashback he felt her hand slip from his, the last touch of her warm, soft fingers. His mind blurred with murky splashes of the cold water, the fading pink blur as it disappeared deeper and deeper into the water. Tears burned behind his eye lids as the old man stroked her face behind the glass picture frame. He would never understand it, never.

Taking a deep breath to compose himself, the old man straightened his back and with a sudden and unexpected wind of determination, he headed outside to pick all of his red peppers.

how down up is
by Jonathan VanderPloeg

So much blood
Pumping through my ears
So much noise for such a still moment
I hold on by my toes
To the edge
My voice is snatched by
The forces pulling
Down, down, down
Always pulling down
When I look up
All I see is down
All is not on its right side
My floor is now set in the sky
Such a bland blue uniform
Dancing between my toes
It moves to music
With the beat that pounds in my ears
This way and that, always
Pounding, pounding, pounding
A new direction with every pound
My hair, resting on end
Sways in time
It seems that is all that is here
Time, time, time
Nothing here but time
Not killing, or wasting, or taking, or
making, or giving
Just, being
Being in time
A rock crumbles and floats with the
down
Silently sailing on its course
Slowly revolving on its care-free path
Then, reaching the end,
It claps to break the silence
And the noise of the moment
So too, does the dance come to a climactic
finish
And with thunderous applause,
I pull myself back up-side
Reeling for a moment, I look down
And as the grass ballroom spins to a halt
I realize
Just how down up is

on books

literature reviews

by Emily Williams,
Joel Faber,
and Maria Geertsema

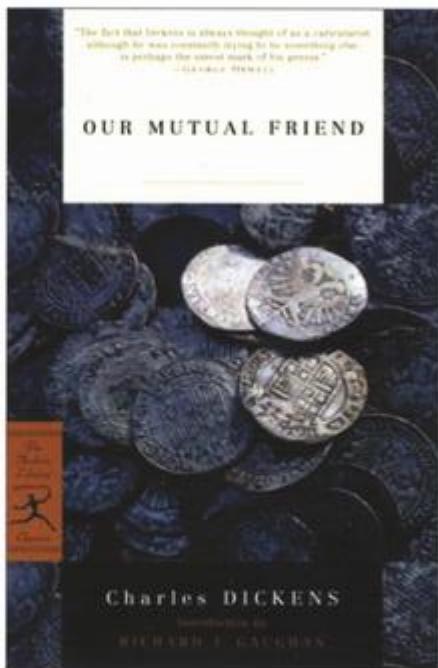
Our Mutual Friend
by Charles Dickens
Reviewed by Emily Williams

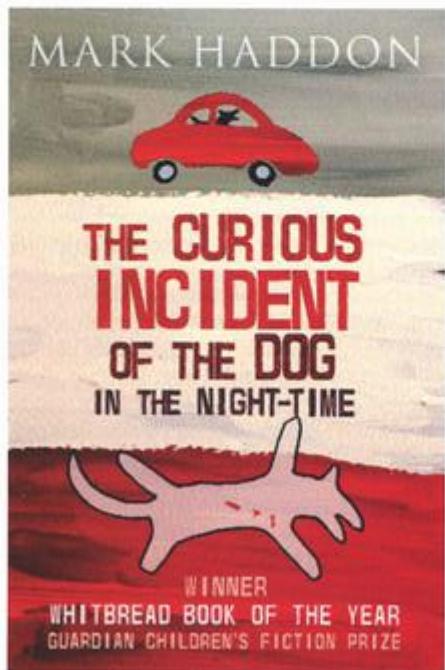
It was in my third year of an English degree that I suddenly realized I was a fraud: how could I be an English major if I'd never read anything by Charles Dickens? So I picked up *Oliver Twist*. It was the beginning of the end for me.... I was hooked. *Oliver Twist* was followed by *Bleak House*, and since it was now the summer and I had guaranteed reading time during my sunny lunch breaks, *Bleak House* was followed by *Our Mutual Friend*. While I had struggled a little with the highly descriptive 700-odd pages of *Bleak House*, this was not to be the case with *Our Mutual Friend*.

If you have heard that Charles Dickens is "boring," you haven't read *Our Mutual Friend*. Dickens' plot has enough twists and turns to keep the most avid soap opera fan riveted to the screen.... I mean, to the page. While there are chapters that slow down the pace, the way the story comes together in the end makes it worth the time spent setting the stage.

Written in Dickens' distinctive style, *Our Mutual Friend* is a masterpiece of plot and character development. The

story revolves around the mysterious death of John Harmon, heir to a fortune left him on the condition that he marry the girl his father has chosen. Harmon's death affects the upper and lower classes, causing relationships to be created and unravelled, all in Dickens' characteristically descriptive and witty way. These characters range from that pillar of English society, Mr. Podsnap, through the members of his dining circle, to Lizzie Hexam, daughter of a man who fishes for money — money scavenged out of dead men's pockets. Some take themselves too seriously (cough, Mr. and Mrs. Veneering), while others are comic from their first appearance (yes, Mr. Noddy Boffin, this is you). While *Our Mutual Friend* is a devastating critique of the Victorian obsession with money and manners, it is at the same time a wonderful story full of endearing characters (who could resist poor Mr. Twemlow?) intertwined in ways you won't expect!





The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time
by Mark Haddon
Reviewed by Joel Faber

The genius of this excellent novel is focused in the expression of one character: the narrator. Christopher John Francis Boone is autistic. He knows all the countries of the world and their capital cities, and every prime number up to 7,057. He is painstakingly exact about objective things and very observant, but does not easily understand facial expressions, body language, or anything beyond the explicit meaning of words. Haddon uses the first-person narrative form to allow the reader insight into Christopher's character, and in so doing intensely focuses on his unique perception of reality. Christopher often observes interaction between other people which he does not fully understand, but the significance of which is plain to the reader -- in the relationship between his father and mother, for example. The effect of this perspective is to immerse the reader in reality the way that Christopher experiences it, while simultaneously highlighting the effects of his social impairment.

A potential danger of writing a novel through an autistic narrator is of doing injustice to the challenges of autism, either by using it lightly, as a gimmick, or by misrepresenting the experience and real struggles of autistic people, but Haddon has worked closely with autistic students, and not only has the necessary respect and familiarity with autism, but is able to translate that understanding fluently into literature. A striking undercurrent throughout the book is of the implicit love and empathy felt for the narrator by the author. The Curious Incident is compellingly real, rivetingly told, and touchingly honest. Mark Haddon has succeeded in telling not simply the story of the curious incident of the dog in the night-time, but in telling the person of Christopher John Francis Boone -- and he is a person we all need to meet: someone from an often-misunderstood part of society, uniquely gifted, and deeply in need of our love; no different than every other human being.

Anansi Boys
by Neil Gaiman
Reviewed by Maria Geertsema

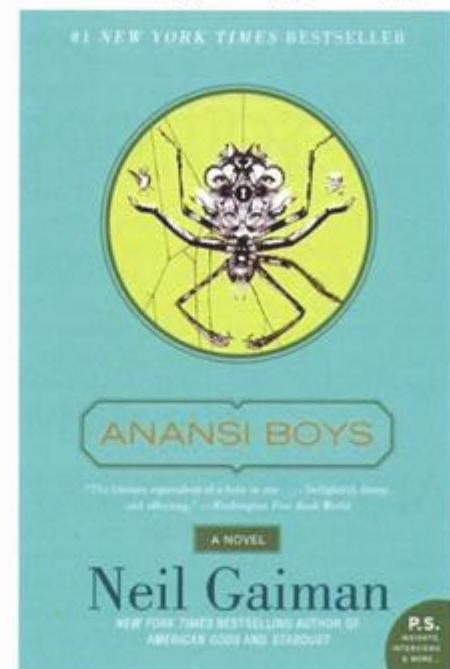
It was the dedication that got me. After all, how can you turn away a book that is dedicated to you? "You know how it is. You pick up a book, flip to the dedication, and find that, once again, the author has dedicated a book to someone else and not to you.

"Not this time."

Fat Charlie Nancy, the protagonist of this novel, has to contend with the hardship of an embarrassing father. Now most of us would rather not be with our parents in certain situations, but whether at a dog show competition, the first day of school, or in the hospital near his mother's sick bed, Fat Charlie Nancy is perpetually plagued with this unfortunate sentiment. Embarrassment resides even after his father's sudden death. Fat Charlie attributes this to his father's lasting influence; when he names something, it sticks. Not only is the death a cause for a sore point, but Fat Charlie attends the wrong funeral and misses the service and everythin' of his own father.

Chalk this up as another unfortunate and embarrassing incident. Fat Charlie returns in a state of discomfort to the neighbourhood where he grew up with the company of four old ladies. It is here he is informed that his father is a god and he has a brother he never knew he had. Nothing out of the ordinary, right? All he has to do is talk to a spider, and his brother will come.

This carefully spun story by Neil Gaiman, author of the book *Stardust* (which has been made into a major motion picture), is a story of Fat Charlie and his family in which the reader is easily entangled. Fighting. Revenge. Monsters. Chases. Escapes. Love. Mothers-in-law. This book offers enjoyment page after page.





salt and light

by Sam Martin,
author and
Redeemer alumnus

Notes on the International Booker Prize and Writing Faithfully

A few years ago I sat in on a session with the judges of the inaugural International Booker Prize, one of the world's biggest literary awards that takes into account not one book but an author's entire written output. Aside from the fact that Margaret Atwood and Michael Ondaatje were sitting just to my right, two things struck me in that stuffy auditorium, some salt and light in a bland and dimly lit room, and these two things got me thinking about what it means to write faithfully.

Gnarled

by Joshua Hildebrandt

The first thing came from Colm Toibin, a well-known Irish writer. Toibin, the main spokesman it seemed for the group, was answering a question about the range of books the judges had encountered in their readings. He answered that on the one hand they had read writers like Don DeLillo and Salman Rushdie who seemed able and intent on stuffing as much of the world as they could into the pages of their novels like *Underworld* and *Midnight's Children*. Then, he said, they had encountered a writer who had set an entire novel in a single room with a single character and though the setting was so stark and the action minimal, the book evoked a full and mysterious world of the mind. Both types of novels, Toibin said, dug down deep to mine a rich vein of human experience and both conjured fully formed worlds.

Mining that rich vein of human experience, I have thought recalling Toibin's comments, is how as a writer you bring salt to your reader. There are many things people do to add savour to their lives, richness and tang, and reading is one of those things. As I mulled over what Toibin said in that room I knew I wanted my own writing to dig down deep enough to find those mineral deposits of truth—what it means to live in the world—and to deliver those granules in stories that would, hopefully, be salt to my readers. And I realized this could be done through epic stories that span continents and eras as well as in stories that delve into the mind and inner life of a single character. This "mining"—in either type of story, big or small—is an intense looking at the world in all its strangeness, tasting the world in all its succulence. But there is also bitterness, brokenness. As you know from your own wounds, our world's skin is cracked, lashed, and bleeding. But salt is good for wounds as well as bland food.

My dad once cut his hand badly with a chainsaw and he staggered up to our house where my great aunt was canning peaches. She saw the wound, the blood, told my dad to look out the window and poured raw salt on his gash, packing it in with her palm. My dad dropped to his knees with the shock and sting of it but the salt purified the wound and began the healing of torn tissue, creating a scar, which is what he points to now when he tells the story. When I read Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* or Flannery O'Connor's *A Good Man Is Hard To Find*—dark stories dealing with deep wounds—I feel as shocked as my dad when my great aunt poured salt into his cut. Such stories can drop you to your knees, but they can also heal the very wounds they seem to cause. How is this done? It is accomplished by telling the truth about the human condition, as McCarthy and O'Connor do.

This is the valley I staked my tent in while writing *This Ramshackle Tabernacle*, a book of dark stories and different descents into the world, yes, but also submersions into the hell of depression, addiction, loneliness, and even murder.

When you write, sunk deeply in such experiences, you may not be looking for the mineral deposit of truth—you may just be looking for a way out. That's how I felt in some stories. But what you stumble upon in the dark may surprise you when you raise it to your lips and taste that startling savour: that moment in the story when you know you got it right, when your description of the world is true enough to taste.

The second thing that struck me in that auditorium, hearing about the experiences of the judges in reading for the International Booker Prize, came from the South African writer Nadine Gordimer. Someone asked: What is it that you are looking for in reading all these hundreds of authors? What is the one thing you seek?

"I don't want to sound too precious about this," Gordimer said softly but firmly, "but, if I may speak for my fellow judges—and tell me if you disagree—I think we are all looking for illumination."

No one disagreed. In fact, they all nodded their consent. What a thing to still a room of academics and grad students! What do you seek in reading the great writers of the world? Illumination. But what does that mean? And does a writer seek this same light? Judging by the fact that two of the jurors were writers—Toibin and Gordimer—and judging from the many and varied responses of writers I have talked to since, both Christian and non-Christian, I would say this is what a lot of writers seek.

But light, in a story, has to come from the world of the story. A story is not an aquarium you can shine a flashlight down into, some Energizer-powered moral. This is not illumination any more than Christianese talk constitutes authentic dialogue. When Christ said, "I am the light of the world," he didn't say it from heaven, he said it with his feet caked in Palestinian clay. So the light we seek in stories is best found incarnated in real lives, in a world made "real" because it is fully imagined and true.

Illumination in stories isn't found through dreamy otherworldly star-gazing, but through digging into the reality of the world around us. In this we come back to the mining metaphor, but what we are mining for this time is different than salt and more like Labradorite, a feldspar mineral that occurs in large crystal masses in which colours play in what is called labradorescence—the result of light refracting within the stone. As a writer, you can never shine light into a story, even with accompanying choir music, however baroque or classical—the result is hokey, contrived. If you want to convey your faith in stories, think less of "conveying" it and more of wrestling with it, like Reverend Aimes in Marilynne Robinson's novel *Gilead* or Annie Dillard in *Holy the Firm*.

Or take a cue from the writer of Genesis. Shape a world, make it real, build up families in it, add intrigue—ar-

ranged marriages, belligerent uncles, deceitful brothers—and describe a journey. On this journey you will inevitably find yourself wrestling in the night with God. You will be marked—Marilynne Robinson tells us that all good stories wound—but you will also be named. This is God giving himself to us in his good gift of language: God becoming the Word and the Word becoming flesh. And this is God's covenant with you as a writer: In wrestling with God and questions of faith, illumination becomes language and the light—any redemption found in your writing—will come from within your story, the labradorescence of authenticity.

Salt and light: this is what we look for in the world's great writers, even by secular standards it seems. But if the salt loses its saltiness, if you as a writer only scratch the surface of the world instead of digging deeply into life on this earth, your stories won't stay on the table but be thrown out into used book bins. And if the light in your stories comes from pot-light morality shone down on your characters in cheap authorial judgments rather than coming from within your characters' authentic struggles with faith, then the light is really darkness and your stories will be dull and boring.

However, if you can learn from great writers, even those not from your faith community—like I learned from listening to and reading the works of Colm Toibin and Nadine Gordimer—then you will know that the essence of good writing is digging deeply into the world. By doing this you will, through mud and darkness and damp cold, find the salt that will add savour and bring healing, and you will uncover the Labradorite stone—that pearl of great worth—that will truly illuminate your readers. Seek less than this and you will waste your talent. But seek it, even at the risk of being buried alive in your work, and you will find it and in this way bring something genuinely good into the world.

We all have a judge who reads our lives and works from beginning to end and the prize he offers makes the International Booker Prize sound like a copper coin in a tin bowl. He is looking for something, yes, something deep, earthy, of great worth. But he is not just looking down on us from above, judging. He is also in our stories, waiting to tussle with us in the dark—waiting to mark us and bless us. Writing should be no less than seeking this encounter.

the oxford canal by Emily Germain

Here it is, beyond the rush of commuters,
Beyond the harried face of humanity,
Lending to our sad and superficial reality
An unattended sense of time.
Here, moss-covered net bags on their noses,
A garden ghost-town of boats
Sits along the water like a gypsy encampment.
Mud-caked kayaks rest on their roofs.
Lilies bloom in plots along the path.
A bicycle stands strapped to a twisted tree,
Whose tassels trail the water.
And all around, silence, not a soul.
Inside the window of a boat,
Ripe red tomatoes wait by a sink.
Family photographs line a shelf.
But all is still.
Wind touches the water
And I walk inside a prayer.

a view of winter by Emily Germain

Today, the sky presents itself in white,
And silent, solid as a rock-hewn wall,
It stands around the world. Its face recalls
A void, as trees reach up to match its height.
Today, the sky is distant in our sight,
A filter, masking sun with cloudy pall;
A deathly stillness hangs in trees, and all
Of life lies cold beneath the stony light.
But through the window, through the frame of screen,
The closer branches, sharply caught, stand dark
Against the white. Their naked fingers, stark
As thorns, still run with liquid summer's dream.
And silent still, they pass the days between,
As winter's walls uphold its ashen arc.

the desert of winter by Rhea Longman

A winter scene, a winter's day—
The river snakes across the land:
Frozen as it would be
In a desert full of snow.

Slowly slithering to the sky,
Where birds cackle and caw.
In the distance, their fluttering
Disturbs the stillness of the hour.

The oak waits patiently,
And spreads its frail, old arms
Against the grey-shining arc
For some mercy from the clouds.

The firs sit in anticipation
For when this Eden will bloom again.
The air remains hushed in silence,
Praying for the curse to be broken.



Reaching Beyond
by Jordan Powell

church, defined
by Laura Spoelstra

in my church
we have
loud music
electric guitars
and our pastor
isn't some
square who
wears suits
and a
paisley tie.
In my church
we sit
on the floor
and sometimes
we dance
and never
have to do
anything
we don't want to
because isn't that
how church should
be?
in my church
we sit in pews
straight up with
our best clothes
while the organ
belts hymns at us
and the pastor
thumps his bible
and yells
until his face goes red
and I think
he might have a heart attack
because
he loves God
so much.
I nod my head and
follow along
in my bible
taking notes
because isn't that
how church should
be?



the weak to shame by Jonathan Silverthorn

My life

(counting all its fallacies
and shortcomings alike:

the days I do more
the days I do less
with no address for the issues at hand

trusting my own strengths
owning my talents
wronging the right while writing
nothing of value, of fiscal worth

forming empty fills
for holes that were never there

the debts to society
to the terrors: ma- and pa-

vacating the premises
without stepping on the grass
or returning to the scene of the crime

leaving the mind behind
or so not to speak
but be silent

in all its criticism
and planned inadequacy
with regards to poetry,
though not truly my life)

is for the glory of God



Breaker
watercolour, 5-panel
by Sam Kammenga

black beads by Emily Germain

When pooled together in a hand,
They chatter like a stream over rocks,
Cascading, when released, in a spray of black

When orbiting a woman's neck
They shine bright like little lost stars,
Winking, when observed, into the darkness

When draped over a bedroom mirror
They drip down like the blood of the earth
Recalling, when handled, the birth of stone

And when crumpled in a shaking fist
They lift words like a trembling song
Bridging, when needed, the broken divide



ten o'clock

by Brittany Knapper

There once was a world where all the eyes could see, all the ears could hear, all the mouths could sing. It was a world where the seconds stem from the minutes like the light stems from the dark. Where beginnings, middles and ends are as blurred as the edges of clouds, colliding with the blue sky. Stories, much like clouds, must start somewhere, and since one must not start a story in the middle, after much has happened and little makes sense, one must start before time could call itself time. One must start when eyes and ears and mouths were no more than apparitions on the cold, still, silent windowpanes of a ten o'clock train. And when a train sits still as the sand falling in the hourglass, still as the hands on the face of the old grandfather clock in a shop down the street. In a still train are silhouettes against a gray canvas. Their faces slowly emerge from the fog of time and day and dream. Eyes meet face and focus and then, there is breath. Their chests rise and fall steadily

as waves upon the shoreline. As the beginning approaches with grandeur and colour and song, there is a cough.

A cough is not a song.

Then, a pardoning.

A silhouette moves.

“Excuse you.” It is a woman’s voice. It is answered by another cough, this one deep and frayed.

Blue eyes stare up into blue eyes as silhouettes melt away and reveal faces in pastels and watercolour. The woman looks down and smiles tenderly at her child. She reaches out and straightens the necktie of the girl’s uniform. Blue fabric separates from the white of a shirt, and the woman’s floral skirt dances about with astonishing splashes of colour.

“Ma,” says the child, “what will they have for me there?” The child trembles as she speaks. The soft rumbling of engines shuffles suitcases above. The woman imagines green valleys and forests, yellow flowers and sunshine. She exhales slowly as the thought of letting her child away from her unveils emotions. And the woman becomes mother, blinking back a tear. Small hands hold bigger ones. Mother and daughter comfort each other. She ponders a moment.

“Many things,” she answers. “Many things that will make you happy and that will make you smile a big smile. Then I will hear your song.”

“It will make me sing?” eyes widen with awe.

Spine

by Joshua Hildebrandt

"It will make you dance. And I will dance with you."
"Will there be tea parties?" asks the child.

"Yes."

"And will there be gardens?"

"I hope so."

"And will there be big ole trees like the ones in the park?"

"Mhmm."

"And can I climb the trees like I climb in the park?
Can I live in the trees too?"

The woman thinks a moment, "Only if you let me climb up into your tree-home and serve me tea in the best cups and saucers." She pats the small bear the child clings to. It is missing one eye, and a threaded X marks the spot. "And teddy must be the guest of honour."

"What if...what if Teddy doesn't want to go?"

"Then you must tell him of the wonderful things that lie ahead." She strokes the girl's brown hair gently. Looking down, her rose sweater falls around the girl's body. One small hand grasps ivory-skinned fingers. Madonna and child.

"But what about Dolly? What about my bedroom?" asks the child.

Mother thinks a moment. "I don't know..." her voice trails off.

"But Ma, you know everything I don't know. That's why you're my Ma, isn't it?"

Another cough - deep and frayed, and now disapproving.

"Ma," says the child, trembling once again. She points to a shadowed figure. It is a man. The man wears a military cap

and green clothes. His one ear is patched and he carries a brown satchel. His face and his dark, gray eyes fade into the shadows. Mother pulls her child in.

"Is he one of them? Is he the reason that the lights fall from the sky and the engines roar and there are black boots everywhere?" Wide eyes and innocence. The woman strokes the child's head.

"No," she says. "But he is why you must go."

The shadow man stirs. His gray eyes engulf the light and dancing and astonishing splashes of colour, and then he speaks. His voice is raspy.

"Name's Truck," he leans his head forward. Gray eyes dim and haunted by the sounds of war, he holds his satchel and begins to rock back and forth, back and forth. His face convulses with memory, and he yells "BEEP BEEP BEEP!" Then he shrinks back into the gray canvas and says nothing. In his eyes are terrors. Men dying red around him, mud flying brown and slimy under his tracks. Knowledge tainted by reality, he wishes life away. "It's not for the child to -" his voice cuts out. He cannot escape, he cannot hide, yet he is hidden, fading away.

Mother and child sit as stone, silent, eyes closed, mouths quivering. And the beginning comes. Grandeur, colour, and song fall from the sky as apparitions on a cold, still, silent windowpane are enfolded by light stemming from darkness. And the colour turns into fire and the song turns into screeching and squealing. And there is smoke and there is laughter, and there are metal beasts flying above. There are blinded eyes, and deafened ears and mouths with no song. This is the moment when time is given its name, and the train begins to move as the old grandfather clock's monotonous hands tick on.

Life is a journey and I walk two paths, one at a time

One is littered with words as leaves in autumn
Each crunch, swish, flutter, and fizzle
Another step along the carpeted path

The other is filled silent motions as looming sentries over my shadow
Every twitch, flick, step, and start
Accounted for with dreadful accuracy

The second is an uphill path, and is climbed
for the purpose of sliding down the other side,

As any child could tell you

Yet, to find purchase on a steep descent, and to aid the gruelling ascent

A walking stick is what is needed.

A support and aid in times of trouble and hardship,

A restraint and foothold against freefall.

Such an offer should be difficult to refuse.

paths
by Jonathan VanderPloeg



[untitled]

by Joel Sjaarda

almighty human

by Jeff Exner

I look up to see something blocking out the sun. That something grows larger until it is falling on me. My first reaction is to lift my arms to stop it. After opening my eyes I am surprised to find that I have actually caught the thing. My legs tremble beneath me, and my arms shake. I cannot guess what it is or how this giant thing is not crushing me. I am not strong enough to hold it. Or am I? Based on its sheer weight I should be flattened right now. So then why am I not? This giant thing hangs by some force other than my own. What is saving me right now? I groan at the weight of my predicament.

musings

by Taylor Kraayenbrink

Glancing skywards I catch a glimpse of a shiny thing glinting in the sunlight. Is this thing trying to crush me? Am I holding it up, or is it holding me down? Another grunt. I look towards the safety of home a short distance away. From here I can see members of my family. I can see the rocks marking entry to the colony. They are now blocking the hole instead. I sense our achievements erased. My family is trapped. I can see them. Panicking. Running. Attacking. Defending. Mindlessly fighting for survival. Something terrible is happening. I wince and shake beneath the incredible burden pinning me. I cannot get out from under this thing without being crushed. I, too, am trapped. Is there purpose behind all this? I glance up at the shiny thing hovering over home and watch the sunlight focus through it. It magnifies into a pure point that directs at the earth. I keep my arms pressed under the giant crushing thing. What else can I do? I look back at home. I can't save them. My family is lost. They run in all

listen. intently to this (poetry) reading. the bard's work is (as he fearlessly admitted in prose) spawned from an obsession with ghosts. absorb care,fully: his translucent, almost animated portrayal(specters, you see, whisper in monotone) of his trans sentient companions. his powers of mediation are chilling, uncanny even—he possesses a talent, lending these apparitions a rotundity (almost to human depth). these phantoms are almost sanguinely fascinating.

directions. Why is this happening? I can hear their screams. I watch that point follow my sister as she flees. It lights her up. Then she screams. She starts to smoke from the inside out. Then she blackens and chars. Then she combusts. Where is god? Nothing is left of her. What sort of being would allow this to happen? The beam of light moves again. Another sister is caught as she flees. She burns up before she can cry out. So I cry for her. Is the thing that holds me down the same that is killing my family? I watch the shiny thing methodically direct that light of burning terror and death at my family. My whole family is panicking. Does it know what it is doing, this thing about to crush me into oblivion? Was this misery inflicted by choice? Some sick joke a giant plays on those it is bigger than? I cannot think of a prayer that will save me. Almighty, spare this poor ant from being crush—.



roadside psalm by Jesse Burke

A
sojourner am I,
lost in the rocks and bogs
of nowhere. I come to you
with broken fingers. I stand here
with only shame. I cannot tell tales
in all the tongues of men that will
dispel this lightness. I cannot keep
my feet from burning. I say to you
I am lost. I say there is nowhere
left to go. Hold me, dear land.
Open your mouth and swallow me.
I saw a woman, once, fall tortured and shorn
into your arms. Open, I say, and swallow me whole.
Do not altar me, or mark my place with stone.
I will walk still beneath you. I will feel the rain
when it comes. I will steal out into the night.
Let me not be catacombed. Let me not
be ensnared. Let my feet burn still
when I am cold. Let me
be.

Wish
by Katelyn Borgdorff

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